

It might be a little irregular to have your time taken up with a letter from a strange lady. However, I do not consider myself a strange lady--I am not strange to myself, as I have known myself for more than forty years. I may at first, seem strange to you-- but if you will look at your most recent map of the Island of Palmyra and note two islets side by side on the North shore between Strawn Islet and Cooper Islet, you will find their names to be the same as the two that are signed at the end of this letter. Idella and Meng. I am Idella and my husband is Meng.

Some day, when you look across the lagoon, as the boobies come in fish-laden to their young and the French Frigates zoom down to snatch the spoils, perhaps you will see the "wraith" of a young woman with two long black braids walking along the shoals. There might even be the shadow of a tan dog, close at her heels. A dog so nearly the color of the girl's brown legs, you might even think you are viewing a side-show freak--a three legged person. That, Sir, is I My "yaller dog" and I. I go back to Palmyra so often in thoughts, that I wouldn't wonder if my dis-embodied self doesn't actually appear there on the white sands of America's most beautiful atolls. If I am there, my dog, "Friday" would be most certainly there.

Are you familiar with the story that reads like fiction, of my husband and I and our young eighteen year old friend Benner, going there from Honolulu on a chartered sampan, to stay two or three months at the most, to investigate the possibilities of commercializing the copra and fishing interests there? The stories today--do not say we went to stay so short a time--they have it a year. Had we gone to stay a year and been prepared to stay a year, the story would not be of interest. We did stay a year, but that is because our source of return transportation failed. Too long a story to tell here. The archives of the Star Bulletin and the Honolulu Advertiser are full of the affair as it happened over that long queer year. How, first one proposed means of transportation failed and then another--how our Copra Company's unfinished boat lay on the dry dock under construction, while the ship-builders walked out in sympathy with a strike in Oakland. The thing goes on and on, and during that time, we three young people walked barefoot along the sands of our domain--really monarchs of all we surveyed.

When I think of any sort of an Air Base being on "our island" I well remember the beginning of the 12th month of our stay there when the Navy boat dropped anchor out beyond Penguin spit, with that one small sea-plane aboard the deck of that "Eagle Boat". This last fall marked the 20th Anniversary of the day the first plane soared above the swarms of sea birds and took pictures of Palmyra, zoomed over the reefs, and the coco-palms and came to rest in shouting distance of our shack on Eastern Lagoon. So, some day when you or any member of your personnel, fly across the length and breadth of America's most isolated outpost, in your modern planes, remember it was first done more than twenty years ago, by Lt. Kilmer, and Lt. Com. Robt. Kirkpatrick, Captain Glick, master of the old Eagle Forty, and other members of the first Naval Aviation Exposition to come to Palmyra.

Since all the troubles in and around our Island Possessions, I have thought more strongly of Palmyra than at any time for years. My old friends in Honolulu have over the years, kept me posted on the different parties that have gone there. Unless some woman has been there very recently, I am still the only white woman that has been there, and I believe there was only one native woman that was there--back in 1885 the Hawaiian wife of a Scotsman lived there a year with her husband, who was an employee of a Guano Company. I have written and sold many articles about my stay there.

©Virginia Military Institute Archives year's experience can do to a person. I had rather take from my memory any one year, than the one spent on Palmyra. I felt tragic when my last pair of shoes were gone, and when my clothes were in shreds--then it occurred to me how funny it was, and from then on it did not worry me. Sometimes I would think of the lovely clothes in my trunks in Honolulu--I was a bride of only four months, when I went to Palmyra. We had stacks of magazines, and when we would view those colored pictures advertising Swift's Premium Hams, we would nearly go crazy. However, when the officers of the Eagle Forty came ashore the morning they landed, brought lovely food, including the largest turkey they could buy in Honolulu--with their Filipino cook, the food tasted queer to us, and it lay untouched on our plates, while the most of the turkey found it's way into the paunches of our visitors.

I got so used to fried fish and coconut crab, lobster, tern eggs, coco-cabbage, conistarch pudding made with coconut milk, chowder made with coconut milk etc., that for ages after we went back to Honolulu, we would just have to have fish to satisfy our appetites. The things we wanted most were ice-cream, cottage cheese dill pickles and white bread and butter--when we got to Honolulu these things were most disappointing to us. Even the shoes on my feet and the hair-pins in my hair worried me to death. I really think my coat of tan started the sun-tan craze women had for so long.

I am afraid I am imposing on you my unknown fellow-islander. It was just an urge to write to any human who might reside on my island. If, in the course of your days, of looking after oursafety, you have time, or are so inclined--write us and tell us about Palmyra. Perhaps you may not be the "writin kind", if not, be so good as to pass this on to one of your associates who might have a yen for writing to strange people about islands, coconut crabs, etc.,

When we were there, no sign of human beings was visible, except the cooper house on Home Islet. No bottles, tin cans, etc. We had a certain place to put these things--we kept the islands as nearly as they were, except we planted coconuts in islets, bare places etc. We daily scanned the horizon for boats, but found to work, kept our minds from going "screwy". We had a 25 foot boat, with sail and motor. Our magneto went on the blink so we took out meter out and lightened the boat, and rigged it so one to sail and steer at the same time--many a day I have sailed alone around the lagoons. Our small punn we used, to get our daily supply of fish. Howwell I remember the giant turtles that lay their eggs on the sands of Strawn--the big leopard rays that zoomed through the waters of the lagoons, the evil eyes of the black conger eels, the way a lobster raised his feelers in the crevices of the reef on the North shore. Walking, always with a cane knife at our belts, we cut our trails through the ferns on the big islets. We never throw a stone at a bird, nor fired the revolver we took with us. I have pictures of a tiny love tern covering her well-balanced egg on a limb of a tree, with my own hand two inches beneath her. I touched the silly boobies on their nests and gathered eggs on the sands after the semi-annual laying of the terns. The sooty terns nested above our door. I soon learned that the well-fed shark were more afraid of us than we were of them. When the Eagle Forty was there for four days, and each day a bunch of fellows came ashore for the day, they were asked not to molest the birds--not to kill coconut crabs, nor mar trees. They even asked my husband's permission before taking the queer pieces of coral away with them. The day I sat in the motor lory with the officers of that boat and rode with few possessions out to the Forty, and looked back and saw the forms of my husband and our young friend and that "yaller" dog merge, through my tears, into a back-ground of palms. That was the saddest of my life. The ship's officers seated me where I could see the island disappear through a rain cloud, and I never dreamed I would never see it again. When we landed in Honolulu a few days later, those officers gave me a colored picture of the boat in a frame shaped like a pilot's wheel, and it hangs on the walls of our den today. I remember the hue and cry of the news reporters, the friends that called, and most of all the sound of the first woman's voice I had heard in a year.

So, in writing to you a strange man, or strange men, over there, it might even be a silly thing today--but it is obeying an old urge to keep in touch with that little bit of Paradise as I remember it. If you happen to be an idealist and have any authority over things there, please preserve as much of nature as you can after all this trouble is over, and the Clipper ships go to all those places it would be wonderful to have at least a portion of Palmyra as a National Forest, to show to posterity America's best example of a true atoll.

It isn't likely that I will ever see that island again, except in memory, but when the toast burns, and the sink gets stopped up, and the laundry loses my best table cloth, and things go wrong in general, it is good to remember the year when those things didn't bother me, and when I walked bare-foot through the sands of Palmyra.

To you, whoever you are, and to the men stationed there, I say God keep you, and remember all times are not war times, and perhaps a day will come when the sun blazes up over Eastern Island, and sinks beyond the mouth of that crescent that bounds Palmyra to the East and the West—may on that day peace be restored and you can return to your own homes, and leave my islands to the boobies, the terns, the French Frigates, and the crying curlew.

When you walk along Idella Isle, see if there is a pile of coral well in the middle of the island. That is supposed to be a cairn that marks the spot where the island was named. If it isn't there, put another one there, and on this day I will look from the windows of my sunroom here high above the Pacific, near the city of Santa Barbara, and say to you, thank you, and the best of everything to you--- I am,

With kindest interest,

/S/ Idella S. Meng.

From: Commanding Officer.
To : All Civilians and Service Personnel.

1. No one is to answer the letter from Mrs. Meng. The Commanding Officer will take care of that. A copy might be a nice enclosure to a letter back home. Those being evacuated from Palmyra in the near future are earnestly requested to refrain from writing or discussing the changes on Palmyra with Mrs. Meng. To do so is a violation of the espionage law.

Gordon Rowe
GORDON ROWE.